



COVID-19 PROTOCOLS FOR VENT TOURS

January 23, 2023

While COVID-19 (hereafter “COVID”) continues to cause concern, we continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. With this in mind, VENT maintains a **COVID vaccination requirement**. **All tour participants and tour leaders must receive the primary series vaccinations in order to travel with us while we are still in a declared public health emergency (just renewed to April 10, 2023)**. Proof of vaccination must be provided to our office at least one week before the start of the tour. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated its guidance to recommend people be **Up to Date** with COVID vaccinations. Although the [CDC website](#) defines “Up to Date” as the primary series vaccinations and all recommended boosters, for those eligible, VENT requires the primary series and strongly recommends boosters. While VENT no longer requires a booster shot for participation on its tours, the high transmissibility of the numerous subvariants should encourage everyone who is eligible to receive boosters to please do so.

VENT has determined this approach to be the best one for keeping our tour leaders and tour participants safe during this time. Our decision and policy anchor a regime of protocols firmly rooted in the latest CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID. **VENT will continue to follow the latest information from the CDC and will update its policy accordingly**. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>

The protocols listed here serve as general guidance for the operation of all VENT tours through the duration of the pandemic. The information for “[Before-Tour Protocols](#)” is strongly recommended, while the “[During-Tour Protocols](#)” will be employed and enforced by the tour leader(s) for the sake of collective group health. In addition to these guidelines, travelers must be prepared to adapt to unique regulations or requirements at country, state, and local levels. No matter what steps VENT takes to create a tour atmosphere conducive to good health and hygiene, we cannot fully protect against the possibility of illness; however, the measures and protocols we describe here will go a long way toward keeping everyone as safe as possible. Additional protocols and information are [provided below for International Tours](#). Also with this update, we include specific information regarding isolation/leaving a tour/returning to a tour in the event you are confirmed with a COVID infection.

VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

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VENT strongly recommends the purchase of travel insurance. Good travel insurance policies (such as those offered by Ripcord Rescue Travel Protection) include strong medical expense and trip interruption benefits and 24/7 access to medical professionals. In particular, travel insurance with a strong trip interruption benefit is recommended because such policies will regard Covid-related quarantine (should it occur) as a form of trip interruption and will help cover your losses.

BEFORE-TOUR PROTOCOLS

Based on the [latest CDC guidance](#), VENT strongly recommends participants adopt the following protocols to reduce the threat of contracting COVID-19 prior to joining the tour. These measures are not to be taken lightly. COVID has been confirmed among a number of tour participants in the earliest stages of our tour, and it is suspected that the virus was contracted just before the start of the tour.

Booster shots: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and CDC have recommended booster shots for those who have received primary series vaccinations. With the release of the second booster shot, the CDC has updated its guidance to recommend people be **Up to Date** with vaccinations (primary series and boosters, if eligible). Please refer back to the first paragraph of page 1 of this document for specific information about VENT's vaccination policy, and visit the website of the CDC for more information about [booster shots](#).

Avoid contact with others whose vaccination status is unknown: Avoid close contact, especially indoors, with others whose vaccination status is unknown for the 14 days prior to the start of your tour. Environments to be avoided include but are not limited to sporting events, restaurants, bars, movie theaters, and parties.

Practice proper social distancing: For the 14 days before departure, maintain a distance of 6 feet when in the presence of persons who are not members of your household. This is especially important when in proximity to anyone whose vaccination status is unknown. Avoid close contact with any person who has tested positive for COVID-19, is exhibiting symptoms, or has been exposed to the disease within the last 14 days.

Masks: For the 14 days before departure, masks should be worn in all indoor public settings, and in private settings when in close contact (less than 6 feet) with anyone who is not a member of your household and/or whose vaccination status is unknown. Please refer to the section on masks and mask-wearing in the "During-Tour Protocols" that follow. Please bring enough masks to get you through the full length of the tour.

Pre-departure Covid test: From the time VENT resumed tour operations in April 2021, we have strongly recommended that all participants get tested for COVID prior to departing for a tour. Given the especially high transmissibility of the spate of subvariants in circulation at any one time, we re-emphasize the importance of pre-departure testing. A “Rapid” antigen test taken on the day before departure is a recommended and generally reliable method for virus detection. At the very least, participants should administer an at-home test. The purpose of a pre-departure test is to catch a possible infection before you attempt to travel and/or join the tour group. Having contracted COVID previously does not protect you from reinfection!

Transportation to the airport: On the day of departure, if assistance is needed getting to the airport, please try to ride with someone from your household. Whenever possible, avoid ridesharing options or public transportation. If you are unable to travel with someone from your household, always wear your mask regardless of the setting.

At the airport: Being in an airport elevates the risk of contracting the virus that causes COVID-19. Airports are often crowded, and the process of moving through an airport typically includes standing in lines of people in close quarters, such as check-in lines, security lines, and when boarding the aircraft. These are inescapable aspects of air travel. To mitigate the heightened risk, maintain proper social distancing to the extent possible and wear your mask. For the airport environment, we recommend following [CDC guidance](#) to wear a medical grade mask (such as N95 or KN95 types) or wear two masks (cloth mask over a surgical mask).

On the plane: Federal rules requiring that masks be worn at all times when on aircraft or other public transportation have been rescinded. Therefore, risk of exposure to COVID is elevated. Please wear your mask at all times on the plane.

IMPORTANT FOOTNOTE: Approximately two dozen cases of COVID have been detected on our tours since August 1, 2022 (out of hundreds of participants). To date, zero cases have been detected after the first round of testing, while all confirmed cases have been detected on or around the second round of testing. This difference in occurrence is striking, and we think serves as strong anecdotal evidence that some people are contracting COVID while traveling to their tour. We strongly urge you to take mask-wearing seriously when in airports and on airplanes, limiting your exposure as much as possible.

Health check: If you are exhibiting signs of COVID-19, do not attempt to join the tour. Common symptoms of the illness are listed on the [CDC website](#) and include fever or chills, fatigue, shortness of breath, cough, loss of taste or smell, and more. Please get tested if you are experiencing any of these symptoms.

DURING-TOUR PROTOCOLS

A VENT tour is a complex operation with significant logistical components. This may include but is not limited to transportation via different vehicle types such as vans, buses, cars, and safari vehicles; internal flights; multiple accommodation changes; visits to a host of private and public facilities and places of business; and interactions with individuals and service providers not associated with the tour group. During a tour, participants must abide by tour leader(s) directives concerning matters of health and safety so that the tour can operate as planned during this public health emergency.

COVID testing: Self-test COVID testing is required of tour participants and tour leaders on all tours on the first and third days of the tour. The adoption of this policy rests on three points:

1. The high transmissibility factor of the subvariants renders a tour group especially vulnerable to community spread should COVID appear on a tour.
2. A self-test administered on the first night of the tour provides a high degree of assurance that the tour will commence with everyone COVID-free.
3. Travel to the tour on Day 1 requires time in airports and on planes. With federal law rescinded regarding mask-wearing in these settings, travelers are now at higher risk of exposure to COVID. A self-test administered on Day 1 will not reveal an infection from the virus contracted that day. A second test, administered on Day 3, is more likely to catch a new infection. **We strongly recommend you wear a mask in airports and on planes.**

Each tour participant must bring two home test kits with him or her to the tour. Your tour leaders will have test kits, but these are intended for surplus use in the event a participant does not have enough testing materials with him or her, or in case additional testing is needed during the tour. The self-testing events will be done as a group.

Mask wearing: Mask-wearing is no longer required in most indoor settings except when traveling in touring vehicles. Masks are still **required** in these situations. The very nature of a birding tour often requires the group spend a lot of time in vehicles such as buses and vans. These are environments of moderate to low air circulation, where tour participants and tour leaders sit in close confines sometimes for long periods. The use of masks in these situations afford a high degree of protection against infection in the event COVID is present among fellow travelers. While we sympathize that everyone is exhausted and worn-out from the events of the pandemic era, it is a fact that outside of vaccination (including booster shots), wearing a mask is probably the most important action a person can take to minimize the risk of contracting COVID. Masks are optional in most other indoor environments. Your tour leader(s) may enforce mask-wearing situationally, such as when a tour group visits a bird blind—the kind of place where multiple people come together in close confines. Masks are not required outdoors at any time.

A well-fitting mask, properly worn over the nose and mouth, forms a barrier that greatly reduces the spreading of respiratory droplets.

Masks are not equal in quality.

Please consider fit and filtration when selecting masks. A high-quality mask should be large enough to completely cover your nose and mouth, and should fit snugly against the sides of your face to prevent air (potentially with respiratory droplets containing the virus) from flowing freely around the edges of the mask and instead flow through the mask. Face coverings such as scarves, bandanas, balaclavas, gaiters, and cloth masks alone do not meet these criteria. A mask with good filtration captures more respiratory droplets containing the virus. The medical grade N95 and KN95 masks offer the best protection in terms of fit and filtration. When purchasing either of these masks, look for those that are NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health) approved. The respected company 3M sells these masks through another company, CPAP1000 (cpap1000.com). NOTES: KN-95 masks are produced in China (as are many N95 masks) and not subject to the same regulations as the N-95. If purchasing KN-95s, you should choose masks approved for use by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) (under Emergency Use Authorization) as they will not carry NIOSH approval. However, good ones (such as those made by 3M and other manufacturers) are just as good as the N95.

Some N95 and KN95 masks can be purchased on Amazon, but there have been problems with counterfeit masks sold through that site. Amazon is probably fine for simple, surgical style masks, but consumers should be cautious about buying higher quality masks through that site.

For masks other than N95 or KN95 types, such as cloth masks or other materials, the CDC recommends masks with a nose wire and with extra layers of fabric. The nose wire prevents air from leaking out the top of the mask and improves fit and comfort. In lieu of N-95 or KN-95 masks, the CDC recommends wearing two masks; for example, a medical procedure (surgical) mask underneath a cloth mask. A recent study conducted in a laboratory found that this combination provided much better protection to the wearer and to others as compared with a cloth mask by itself or a medical procedure mask by itself. Wearing a high-quality mask—ideally an N95, KN95, or two masks—is especially beneficial when in airports or other elevated risk situations.

Your tour leader(s) will have masks with them for group use; however, we ask that you please bring enough masks to last for the duration of the tour.

- **Ventilation in vehicles:** When riding in tour vans and buses, the central air conditioning or vent will always be on to enhance air flow through the vehicle. Air typically will not be recirculated through the vehicle, but rather will be fresh air drawn in from the outside. Air may be recirculated on occasions when outside air conditions warrant, such as when traveling on dirt or gravel roads could otherwise mean drawing dust inside the vehicle when

using the air conditioning or vent. Where weather and travel conditions allow, windows on the vehicles can be opened as another means of improving ventilation.

- **Restaurants and dining:** There is no one-size-fits-all alternative approach to group dining. A host of variables will determine how best to plan group meals. Considerations include weather, dining options, time of day, location, etc. Tour leaders will rely on a range of options throughout the trip, including: visiting restaurants with outdoor seating; visiting restaurants during times of lower occupancy, which means having early breakfasts, early or late lunches, and early dinners; dividing the group into smaller groups to minimize crowding at a table; and ordering take-out or delivery meals.
- **Field checklist sessions:** The field checklist session is another important component of a VENT tour. Such sessions are traditionally conducted in hotel lobbies or in restaurants prior to meal service. The tour leader(s) will make determinations about appropriate settings for when such sessions will take place, taking into account variables such as privacy, ability to practice social distancing, outside seating, weather, and timing. Participants need to be flexible as daily checklist sessions may not always be possible.
- **Symptoms of illness and COVID testing:** Common signs of COVID illness include fever or chills, fatigue, shortness of breath, cough, loss of taste or smell, and more. [Please refer to the CDC website for a full list of symptoms.](#)

If you develop any of these symptoms during the tour, you must self-isolate and notify your tour leader(s) immediately. If this should occur, your tour leader(s) will ask you to take a COVID test. In most situations, a Rapid Antigen at-home test will be the go-to method for testing for COVID infection, although a test performed at a local health facility may also be a possibility.

- **Positive test result and isolation/returning to a tour:** Inherent to travel in the pandemic era is the risk that you could test positive for COVID at any time during a tour. Should this occur, you will be required to isolate from the rest of the tour group. This means leaving the tour, at least temporarily.* In such instances, your tour leader and VENT office staff, and our ground operator (if applicable) will provide as much assistance as possible.** We will work with you to determine the best course of action, which may include communication with your family/emergency contacts and locating resources for access to COVID testing including hospitals, clinics, online resources, and state and county public health departments as may be necessary. Our experiences have shown that isolations due to COVID infection are fairly easily managed. A negative test result (Rapid Antigen Test) must occur in order for anyone in isolation to return to the tour. For many people, but certainly not all, a negative result occurs in 4–6 days following the initial positive result.

*Participants acknowledge that nature tours often involve moving great distances, and that anyone self-isolating in a hotel or lodge will remain behind. We emphasize participants in such situations will never be without support from our staff.

** For international tours, the length of isolation and associated rules and restrictions regarding the infected person will vary by country, although isolation rules have eased greatly in most places. Our primary point of contact will be our ground operator/destination management company, who is best positioned to communicate with local authorities and assist in identifying quality medical care, if needed, and managing logistics (accommodations and meals) for self-isolation. Your return travel to the United States will be managed by VENT, if you purchased your air ticket through VENT, our ground operator/destination management company, and/or your airline.

- **VENT strongly recommends the purchase of travel insurance.** Should your tour be interrupted by illness, your insurer will be an important source of information and support. Travelers should be familiar with the benefits of his or her policy.

INTERNATIONAL TOURS: Additional Protocols and Information

Most places in the world are again open to travelers from the United States, and most places have eased their requirements for testing and quarantine. VENT will revise or update this information as needed.

Protocols and important information for tours to international destinations:

- As of June 12, 2022, a negative COVID test result is no longer required to enter the United States.*

*On January 5, 2023, the federal government announced that those traveling to the United States from China must provide proof of a negative test result for entry into the U.S.
- VENT will not operate a tour to any destination with a mandatory quarantine requirement upon arrival into the country, even for travelers who have been vaccinated.

VENT strongly recommends the purchase of travel insurance, but please note, **some countries are requiring proof of travel insurance with strong medical expense and trip interruption benefits in order to enter the country.** Please check with the VENT office, your preferred travel insurer, or other online resources to learn whether travel insurance is a requirement for entry into your destination country.

AFTER-TOUR PROTOCOLS

- If you develop symptoms of, or test positive for, COVID-19 within 14 days of returning from the tour, please notify VENT immediately, as VENT may need to notify other participants on the tour that a fellow group member has developed symptoms or tested positive.

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